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Religions As a "Life Fact": Al Faruqi's Impact on The International Islamic University Malaysia

by

Ibrahim Mohamed Zein

Abstract

This study addresses the teaching of religion at the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM). The program was influenced by the thought and curricula developed along Faruqian lines. It is a program that delves into Faruqi's view of meta-religion rooted in an ethical paradigm giving it universal perspective and approach toward the study of comparative religion. Actually, the establishment of IIUM and the religion study curriculum implemented at IIUM is a development of Faruqi's earlier vision regarding the teaching of Islam as a civilization and worldview, which he had envisioned and hoped to apply to the academic program at the Central Institute of Islamic Research, Karachi, Pakistan during his professorship there in 1960s, but which was not realized.

Teaching religion in the West was mostly governed by the superiority of Christianity over other religions. The experience of the Department of Religion, at Temple University in the United States, perhaps, is a rare exception where other religions are taught by scholars who adhere to the tenets of the religion they teach.¹ It might be said that this was the situation in the sixties; and certainly since then, a number of institutions in the West followed the lead of Temple University in this regard. Most importantly, perhaps, is it possible for universities in the Muslim world to develop a discipline of teaching religions based on this principle or not. This is because the way

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we teach religion will determine the quality of religious sensibility, which governs the exchange of ideas or the parameters of inter-religious dialogue.

Teaching religion from the perspective of a "World Community Citizen"² will always be a real challenge, but it presents an opportunity of articulating the international dimension of monotheism. It is because the monotheistic understanding of divinity will degenerate into a monolatrous vision, if it does not uphold the principle of the universality of ethics. When the absolute transcendence of God is unambiguously emphasized, the universality of ethics will be both logically and practically maintained within a framework that combines both theory and practice in one unified system.

In this regard, teaching religion at the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM) reflects a sensibility that takes seriously the universal dimensions of Islam to their logical and practical conclusions. More seriously, these universal dimensions serve as an overarching principle for restructuring the curricula of Islamic-revealed knowledge and defining its content. Therefore, the criteria of Islamic-revealed knowledge serve as the sole principles for both understanding and evaluating the scholarly tradition of Islamic sciences. It should be remembered that this experience of teaching religion has been largely influenced by the works of Ismail R. al-Faruqi's work – especially *Christian Ethics*,³ *Islamization of Knowledge*,⁴ and *Cultural Atlas of Islam*.⁵

In this article I will focus on the experience of the IIUM. A considerable space will be devoted to the impact of al-Faruqi's legacy on both the academic agents and teaching materials.

The story of the establishment of the IIUM reflects the complexities of both the framework of the post-colonial state and the dynamics of the Ummah. It has been stated that the IIUM was established in response to the recommendations of the Makkah Conference on Islamic Education in 1977.⁶ But it is equally important to be reminded of the fact that the agenda of establishing an Islamic university in Malaysia was there for a long time before the conference in 1977. The concept paper, which was presented to the Malaysian government cabinet meeting, suggested that the Islamic university should focus on educating Muslim professionals rather than producing students of Islamic studies.⁷ When the IIUM was established in 1983, it had two *kulliyahs* (faculties): *Kulliyah of Laws and Kulliyah of Economics and Management*. In addition to these, a Centre for Fundamental Knowledge (CFK) was meant to provide service courses to these *kulliyahs*. Obviously, the graduates of these two *kulliyahs* were supposed to behave as Muslim professionals. For that objective, the CFK was to focus

on the spiritual and ethical aspects of education, while the conventional subjects in economics, management, and law were left to the *kulliyahs*. Perhaps, the only difference between the *Kulliyah of Laws* and the *Kulliyah of Economics and Management* was that the Shar'iah was taught in the *Kulliyah of Laws*, within the framework of the common-law experience in Malaysia.

The main objective of the curricula of the CFK was to inculcate Islamic values. To this end, twenty-two credit hours were devoted to the students learning about the fundamentals of Islamic sciences, Islamic values, and relevant lessons from Islamic civilization. These academic subjects were supported by extra-curriculum activities, such as *ibadah* camps and others. It should be remarked that the CFK was meant to be the central nerve of the university, where the character of the student would be molded according to its criteria of the Muslim professional. Thus, the CFK played a vital role in both academic processes and character building. Evidently, the very definition of the Muslim professional was left to the CFK to decide on its components. Most importantly, perhaps, the rationale behind establishing the university was to produce Muslim professionals. Therefore, that distinctive feature of the graduate was supposed to be acquired during his academic and extra-curriculum activities organized by the CFK. Clearly, then, the principle of secular humanism in university education was completely abandoned. This was replaced by a set of universal Islamic principles, in which morality and religion were tied together. Most seriously, the Islamic worldview, which is based on *tawhid*, substituted a positivistic worldview. All these were done consciously in a manner that helped the students to systematize Islamic values and to see their relevancy to their respective professions. In this regard, Islam was presented as a comprehensive religion – and in perfect harmony with reason, science, and progressive values. Much emphasis was put on Islamic spirituality, the work ethic, and *wasatiyyah* (moderation).

It should be remembered that, during the eighties, al-Faruqi was regularly visiting Malaysia. When the university was established, he visited the campus in Petaling Jaya and delivered a public lecture on the importance of managing time properly, discipline, and how a Muslim professional should systematize the values of work ethics.⁸ Quite obviously, al-Faruqi saw in the establishment of the IIUM a great opportunity for implementing his ideas on Islamic education.⁹ Prior to this, he noticed that the experiment of the Chicago Islamic College was doomed to fail and it was quite unrealistic to develop the International Institute of Islamic Thought (IIIT) into